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Moral Regulation and Cultural Production: Evidence from Hollywood

14 September 2026 (Mon)
15:00–16:30

LYH310, Lau Lee Yuen Haan
Amenities Bldg., Lingnan University



Prof. JIA Ruixue

Visiting Professor
Faculty of Business and Economics
University of Hong Kong
School of Global Policy and Strategy
University of California San Diego

BIOGRAPHY

Prof. Ruixue JIA is a Professor at UC San Diego and a Visiting Professor at the University of Hong Kong. She serves as co-editor of the *Review of Economics and Statistics*, co-director of the China Data Lab, and co-chair of the China Economic Summer Institute (CESI). Her research lies at the intersection of economics, history, and politics, examining how power structures evolve and shape economic development. Her recent work has focused on the political economy of idea formation and diffusion, with attention to the interplay among the state, education, science, and technology. She is coauthor of *The Highest Exam*, a book on how China's education system affects and reflects society.

ABSTRACT

Moral regulation is widespread across societies, yet its consequences have seldom been examined empirically. We study the Hays Code (July 1934–1960s), which imposed moral guidelines on American cinema, using a regression-discontinuity design with non-U.S. films as a comparison group. Compliance rose sharply around 1934–35 and persisted for two decades. Three further findings carry broader implications. First, the Code generated substantial spillovers beyond its explicit targets: female protagonists declined by 19%, working-class protagonists by 15%, and political narratives tilted conservative; film companies also shifted toward more-compliant genres such as *Westerns*. Second, market forces *amplified* rather than counteracted regulation: companies with larger market size complied more strongly. Third, immigrant directors responded more strongly, especially those with shorter pre-Code careers. These findings reveal how moral constraint, market incentives, and creator identity jointly shape cultural production, and how well-intentioned regulation can generate broad, unintended spillovers.